114 Freya Stark, who is always interesting and whose descriptions of native life and architecture are fascinating and picturesque. But even this intrepid traveller is inclined to stress the poetical side of her experiences, and to leave out the realities of smell and dirt. For dirty and smelly Arabia is.

364 The villages have no drainage or sanitation; garbage and offal are thrown on a heap outside the houses, or on the sea-shore, there to be removed in time by those voracious scavengers, the vultures and kites. It is a common experience to see the carcases of donkeys and other livestock lying on the shore, swollen and covered with flies, decaying under the hot sun. The stench within half a mile of an Arab village is simply appalling; one would be truthful if unkind to describe the Arab as having no prejudices against filth.

515 In their persons the lower classes are extremely dirty by European standards, although they can scarcely be blamed for not taking baths, since water invariably has to be carried for several miles from the wells on the backs of donkeys and is, consequently, expensive. The Arab workers are very poorly paid, and prefer to spend their small earnings on food for their families, and the rare luxuries in which they indulge. The current belief that the Arabs 'wash' themselves in the sand is an anomaly. According to the [193] Koran they are supposed to carry out a certain number of ablutions during the year, especially during the fast of Ramadan and the anniversary of the Prophet's death. As water is scarce, they obey the Holy Book by making a token ablution with sand. Anyone familiar with the grimy grey sand one finds in the vicinity of a [194] village will realize that, used as a 'cleansing' agent, it probably contributes to the sores and skin infections from which so many of them suffer.

136 Another serious cause of infection are the flies, which breed in that climate on a scale to be observed nowhere else in the world. I have seen a plate of fresh dates carried a few yards from one room to another across an open courtyard. By the time it reached the second room it would be covered with a mass of flies at least two inches deep. Incredible to the insect-free European, this must be [264] seen to be believed. Yet the Arab would not think of cleansing food that had been thus contaminated. He nonchalantly sweeps away the flies with his sleeve and proceeds to masticate the polluted mess with relish.

136 Apart from the piles of offal and refuse which are a feature of 366 every village, another inducement to flies are the windowless shops

622 Kalba. There was a lengthy dispute as to who should succeed to the sheikhdom, with the appearance of a wicked uncle who tried on several occasions to do away with his young nephew, who would legally succeed his father. The sheikh of Ras-al-Khaimah tried by various means to acquire the sheikhdom, but eventually the British Government stepped in and appointed the Sheikh of Sharjah's nephew as Regent. This wily Arab was not at all anxious for young Ali to ascend the throne when he came of age, and various devices had to be thought of to keep Ali out of harm's way.

At one time the British Resident in Bushire had the idea of sending him to the Princes' School in Persia, an academy run on English public school lines, to which the sons of the Indian princes were sent. It was considered that not only would such a step be prudent from a political point of view, but that it was advisable for the future ruler to have a sound education. Young Ali, however, would have none of this, and he ran away after the first term. At the time of our visit, he was under the protection of our host, the Sheikh of Sharjah. Handsome in a negro fashion, he was a sulky-looking youth and, I was confidentially informed, was already a past-master in the traditional desert intrigues.

144 827 173 Although the sheikhs of Oman are exceedingly proud of their descent, which in some cases extends to the sixteenth century and derives from some Saiyed, or descendant of the Prophet, there is a fair amount of intermarriage with the more beautiful of their slaves. Thus, even in the aristocratic Qasimi family, a powerful tribe which once ruled the greater part of Oman—and to which Sultan bin Saqr belongs—there are traces of negro blood. Oddly enough, the Arabs are not in the least ashamed of such admixtures. They believe that it gives them virility and strength, and there may be something to be said for the theory.

● 264 A lull had fallen upon the conversation, when one of the sheikh's sons approached his father and began to whisper in his ear. I imagine it had something to do with the preparation of the meal, for the sheikh rose from his chair and beckoned us to follow him to a long, narrow room on the other side of the courtyard. We passed through a fretted doorway and found ourselves in the salle à manger. The floor was liberally strewn with rugs and, on a damask cloth in the middle, there reposed about ten main and five secondary dishes of rice, curry, chipatties, dried fruits and vegetables. The principal dish, in front of which the sheikh seated himself,

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consisted of an enormous pile of boiled rice on the top of which lay a greasy carcase of mutton, liberally besprinkled with oil and grated almonds. 264

At a signal from Sultan bin Saqr, the other nobles seated themselves around the floor on their haunches. A negro slave approached with a silver bowl, a tablet of soap and a ewer of warm water. We held our hands in the bowl, lathered them with soap and, when the slave had poured water over them, dried them with a small towel which he provided. Sheikh Sultan then tore a choice piece of mutton into pieces with his bare hands and placed morsels of it on our plates, an action which in Arabia is considered an honour and distinction.

The mutton was exceptionally greasy and fat and I had some difficulty in swallowing it. It tasted much more appetizing when dipped in a bowl of curry, or eaten with chipatti or one of the spiced dishes. The rice, although somewhat oily, was the best part of the meal, as it was richly sprinkled with almonds and raisins. There were numerous other side dishes, such as *fagar*, a kind of truffle, mushrooms in sauce, little puff-balls of batter filled with cream, figs and dates in sweet syrup, pink iced biscuits and cheese made with goats' milk. Since it was polite to make a hearty meal, we were obliged by courtesy to sample most of the dishes and to consume all the morsels which the sheikh kept putting on our plates. All around us the nobles were belching loudly and smacking their lips with gusto, and we were expected to do the same.

I could not restrain a smile when my mind suddenly slipped back to the memory of a very sedate dinner party I had attended in London a month previously. Yet, for all their noise and somewhat barbaric outward satisfaction, their manners were in their own fashion perfect; they held the food with their fingers with extreme delicacy, and were most expert in the art of rolling meat and rice into an oval wedge so that it slipped into the mouth with ease. They, in their turn, must have been amused at our clumsy efforts to emulate Arab manners, and I am sure that I dropped more rice on the precious Bokhara rug than went into my mouth.

At length the sheikh, with a final belch, rose to his feet, signifying that the meal was ended. Thoroughly gorged, we followed suit, and allowed the slave to wash the grease from our hands. Returning to the throne room, we were handed tiny gilt cups into which a slave poured black mocha coffee flavoured with cloves 264 272 576

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264 576 272 It is considered good manners to drink coffee noisily, indicating satisfaction, for coffee-drinking is a rite with the Arabs. Not less than three cups should be taken, after which one shakes the cup to signify that one requires no more; if this pantomime is not undergone, the slave will keep on filling up the cup until the pot is empty. Usually the arrival of the coffee pot is accepted as a sign that the visitor should shortly take his leave, but on this occasion it appeared that Sultan bin Saqr desired our company a little longer. The slave reappeared with a silver censer, which he proceeded to swing under our noses; the smoke of the burning frankincense filled our nostrils with its sweet fragrance and was most pleasant.

000 When eventually we took our departure, shaking hands with all the nobles in turn, the whole party trouped off to the gateway to see us into our car. The sheikh muttered a blessing: '*s'Alla maleikum*', or 'Allah protect you', and we sped off into the night, feeling about as bloated as city Aldermen after a Lord Mayor's banquet. A short drive across the desert brought us to the Fort, where we found our guests awaiting us, and had to face the formidable prospect of another dinner. However, as it was an eventful occasion, we managed to face up to it and do justice to the admirable meal which Lambert and his cooks had produced. For once there was plenty to drink, bottles appearing like magic from beneath the table. The party was a very merry one, with a great deal of singing (particularly from the jovial Irish officer, Captain Pat. Tandy, who was to replace Bird as Political Officer), and a great many speeches, including a humorous one from Bob Allison, my predecessor.

After Allison's departure for Karachi, affairs on the station continued to run smoothly, except for the torrential rains which flooded the desert and held up our aircraft. It was almost a joke to me to visit Flying Control each morning and inquire when the runways would be fit to use. I could see for myself that only a flying-boat could have landed on them in their present state, but officially I had to obtain a verdict from the R.A.F. authorities and signal a statement to the stations *en route*. At length this got so monotonous that I despatched a message to the effect that the runways would not be serviceable for at least two weeks. Two days later a message came from Karachi: 'Can York land at Sharjah to-morrow?' When one realizes that, apart from the impossible condition of the airfield, a York aircraft requires a run of at least

transport; there is no flat desert, as at Sharjah, suitable for an air-000
field, and the mountain ranges are too close for safe flying.

In parenthesis, I learnt that shortly after the Sheikh of Sharjah 622
had agreed to lease his land to the British for the purposes of an 683
airfield, he was secretly murdered by a hired assassin, who crept into his palace while he slept, put his eyes out with a red-hot iron, and slit his throat. The present ruler of Sharjah, Sultan bin Saqr, never sleeps without an armed bodyguard outside his room, and it is whispered that he is waiting to avenge the murder of his father. He has little doubt who instigated the crime.

An old retainer of the Khan Sahib's, a wrinkled Arab with a 302
henna-dyed beard, Ali bin Achmed, came to talk to us. He is 517
employed as a seaman and looks after the petrol dhow on which the emergency stocks provided by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company are stored. He is a distinguished-looking old man, with a fund of stories which he related to us as the sun sank slowly behind the sandhills and the palm trees leant in ragged silhouette against the sapphire-tinted horizon.

The Khan Sahib closed the shutters, lighted a perfumed coil of 354
anti-mosquito powder, and hung a kerosene lamp from a hook 264
in the ceiling. A slave brought us dishes of rice, steamed lamb, curry balls, chipatties, *haloua*, fruit and turkish delight, and, feeling ravenous, we ate in silence, seated on Persian rugs with our legs tucked underneath us in Arab style.

After the third cup of clove-scented coffee, we sat in the dim [272]
light, smoking cigarettes, while Ali bin Achmed puffed away at 517
his tiny pipeful of hashish. He told us wild stories of shipwrecks on the rocks, and of pirates who plundered the unfortunate vessels and held the passengers to ransom; of British gunboats which shelled the village in reprisal and clapped the headmen in gaol. Then he spoke of the wild men of the mountains, the Shi'hou 186
tribe, who seldom left their dark caves in the hills, and who lived on 563
fish, wild honey and dates. They never mixed with the lowland Arabs, were greatly feared on account of their wild appearance and cruel habits, and were believed to be in league with a djinn.

'There is gold and tin in the mountains,' said Ali, 'but men will not seek for it on account of these wild ones. A man would be rich who dared to climb those cruel slopes and search for the gleaming metal. But, praise be to Allah, it would be a foolhardy enterprise.'

The Shi'hou tribe is a very ancient one, according to Ali, and

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perfume and tobacco. He then took us by the hand and led us through the courtyard into the guest chamber. A terrace of black marble steps led up to it, through a little brass-studded door, which he unlocked. The chamber was a typical Arab interior. Shiraz and Turkish rugs covered the stone floor, and the furniture consisted of a Moorish-type table, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, a cane settee, and a few plush-seated chairs. The walls, however, were not plain as were those of Sheikh Sultan's palace; leather saddles of sheepskin, decorated with red wool fringes, hung from iron hooks; there were numerous photographs of the sheikh and his relatives, as well as a small armoury. This included an old flintlock gun, a German Mauser pistol (presented to the sheikh by King Ibn Saud, from whom he bought his horses), a .22 Martini rifle, and a long hiltless battle sword in a black leather scabbard, richly decorated with bands of damascened gold.

Raschid showed us his armoury with great pride, and explained in detail the history of each exhibit. He then took the battle sword from the wall; it was at least five feet in length and, as he withdrew the blade from the scabbard, he gave it a quick twist with his wrist. The blade shivered and sang like a tuning fork. I tried to do the same but the sword was exceedingly heavy to handle and I failed to get any 'tune' out of it. Raschid told us that the sword was forged for his ancestors at Damascus four hundred years ago, and was a sword of honour. It had been used in battle, as a two-handed weapon, and was reputed to have slain a hundred men.

The sheikh's little son, Abdul bin Hamid, wore a curved Muscat dagger of great beauty, the scabbard and hilt being of chased gold. We sat on cushions on the floor, and were joined by the sheikh's elder son, aged eleven, and a four years' old girl, a black-eyed little mite with pigtails, who was evidently a great favourite of the sheikh's. She wore a little tunic of silk taffeta, richly embroidered short silk trousers and sandals of gazelle skin; her bare ankles were covered with silver rings. She looked thoroughly spoiled, and had the manner of an autocrat, screaming sl..illy at her brother whenever he dared to touch her rag doll.

Hussein, the wazir, entered the chamber with a secretary and some other relatives of the sheikh, including an elderly uncle from Baraimi, and after we had exchanged greetings and washed our hands in the silver bowl, slaves were summoned to bring in the dinner. It was rather early for a meal, and we had not long since

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had lunch, but it was not possible to decline the dishes placed before us. In the centre of the dining-mat was a huge bowl of rice and steamed sheep, very fat and oily; chipatties, truffles, curry, sheep's liver, and pastry puff balls filled with honey. The sheikh presented me with a large piece of fat with his own hands, and I felt sick before it had entered my mouth.

After the meal we again washed our hands and sat drinking out of little brass cups of bitter coffee. Cigarettes were produced and all smoked except the uncle from Baraimi. The conversation, as is customary during social calls, began with polite enquiries after one's health. Raschid then recounted some of his experiences in the hunting field, and sent his son to bring a pile of fine gazelle skins, trophies of the chase; one of especial beauty and fine marking he presented to me, together with a pair of horns. The wazir, Hussein, looked as though he were tired of the conversation, and produced a blackwood reed from the folds of his *abbas* and began to play a wistful little tune. Abdul bin Hamid sang in a high-pitched voice and we sat back on our cushions and listened. The tune was monotonous and without melody, but it had a weirdly fascinating rhythm.

The sheikh, whose tales of the hunt were thus rudely interrupted, grew restless; he belched aggressively and pulled at his beard. At length, losing all patience, he rose abruptly and signalled us to follow him through the courtyard. Hussein went on playing his melancholy tune, so we wandered through the fort with Raschid and his daughter. Scores of ragged children came into the courtyard to stare at us; they were nothing to do with the sheikh, unless they were children of his servants, and he took no notice of them. With his twinkling blue eyes, humorous mouth and hawk-like nose, he might have been an Eastern king, benevolent and wise, surrounded by his subjects. He had perfect teeth, stained at the edges by tobacco, and on his finely-shaped hand wore a large cornelian stone, engraved with an account of his descent. The Arabs do not as a rule have a crest or heraldic design, although some of the sheikhs display a badge, usually in the form of a crescent or sometimes a bird or lion which is engraved on seals and the backs of chairs.

Raschid on this occasion wore a very barbaric-looking turban of white and purple Kashmir wool and looked more like a pirate than ever. When we had seen over the fort, many of the rooms of which were completely bare, he conducted us to the stables